

Fogel, Curtis
Brock University
Insight Grant 2019

Rink Rage: Spectator Violence in Minor Hockey in Canada

Project Summary

This study examines the prevalence, causes, and responses to parental violence, aggression, and abuse in minor hockey in Canada. It draws on 122 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with minor hockey stakeholders across Canada, and the textual analysis of media and legal reports of 65 cases of parental violence in minor hockey, and 58 minor hockey association code of conduct policies. The study reveals how commonplace and normalized parental violence in minor hockey has become. All 122 participants reported seeing parental violence, aggression, and abuse regularly in minor hockey at all playing levels, geographic locations, and competition levels; however, reports of parent aggression were highest in boys' hockey between novice and peewee (7-12 years old). While the legal analysis focused exclusively on cases of physical violence, most interview participants reported that non-physical forms of aggression and abuse, such as yelling insults and threats, were far more common. The most common identified targets of parental violence, aggression, and abuse in minor hockey included referees and coaches, with both groups reportedly being the most likely to leave the sport due to the emotional challenges of aggressive and difficult parents. Other common targets of parental violence, aggression, and abuse included other parents (including parents of players on the same team), athletes, team officials, security, arena workers, and property.

Research Methods

Phase 1 of the study involved the collection and analysis of publicly documented reports of spectator violence in minor hockey in Canada. The documents on cases included legal reports located through the Canadian Legal Information Institute database and media articles located through Canadian Major Dailies. In total, 65 different cases of physical violence in minor hockey in Canada were identified for analysis. Phase 2 involved collecting and analyzing code of conduct policies of minor hockey associations in Canada, which were located on organization websites. In total, 58 relevant policies were identified and analyzed. Phase 3 involved semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 122 minor hockey stakeholders across Canada. Interviews were conducted in French and English depending on the preference of the participant and ranged in length from 40 minutes to an hour. Hockey stakeholders who were interviewed included parents, coaches, referees, league organizers, arena workers, and former minor hockey players. Ethics clearance to conduct the interviews was provided by the Brock University Research Ethics Board.

Research Results

All 122 minor hockey stakeholders who participated in the study indicated that they had witnessed physical and verbal abuse by parents in minor hockey and that the problem is prevalent enough to warrant significant changes to minor hockey culture, policy, and governance in Canada. Both the legal case analysis and interview data revealed that there are many common factors that contribute to parental violence and aggression in minor hockey. In nearly every legal case and example described by participants, the aggressive parent was male, regularly consumed alcohol before or during minor hockey games, had some previous experience as a former hockey player, and maintained very high, and seemingly unrealistic, expectations for their child's performance and advancement in the sport. Nearly all the cases involved boys' hockey and occurred in age groups under 12-years-old. While most hockey associations have codes of conduct that prohibit abusive behaviours by parents, it was reported that very few enforce their policies. Instead, parental aggression is typically either ignored, tolerated, or in some cases, promoted as part of the celebrated culture of certain organizations. While parental aggression and violence was described by all participants as an unpleasant and unnecessary aspect of minor hockey, only a few former players and parents indicated that it caused them or someone they knew to leave the sport. In contrast, most coaches and referees indicated that they knew of other coaches and referees who either left the sport or the playing level because of the abusive behaviours of parents.

Policy and Program Implications

This research highlights the significance and importance of the development and implementation of the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport. There are a broad range of abusive behaviours exhibited by some parents in minor hockey in Canada that could be defined as forms of maltreatment, which highlights the importance of an inclusive definition of maltreatment that goes beyond physical and sexual abuse and includes harassment, bullying, threats, and other forms of psychological and emotional harm. Likewise, it highlights the importance of Universal Code being inclusive of all sport stakeholders, as the perpetrators and victims of violence and abuse are not restricted to players and authority figures in sport. Work to expand the application of the code and ensure that it is implemented at all levels of minor hockey in Canada must continue. Interview participants commonly reported the importance of policies to prevent and respond to parental aggression in minor hockey, but that the challenge is to ensure they are properly implemented, which has not been done consistently to date. Participants also recommended restrictions on the use of alcohol at minor hockey events, mandatory and ongoing training on appropriate parental conduct, zero tolerance by hockey associations when parents behave violently, and a large-scale cultural shift in minor hockey away from an over-emphasis on high-performance and winning at young ages towards positive physical, emotional, and psychological development of athletes. The safety and well-being of all minor hockey participants and stakeholders needs to continue to be a top priority in the development and implementation of sport policy and programming.

Next Steps

All participants in the study were adults at the time of their interview. Athletes who currently play in minor hockey leagues at young ages where the most harassment and abuse was reported, were not included in the sample. Future research should work directly with young athletes to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences and perspectives on parental violence, aggression, and abuse in sport. Due to the Covid pandemic at the time data collection for this study was completed, in-person observational study of minor hockey was not possible. Future research should also include participant observation of actual hockey games and tournaments, to gain greater insight into the frequency and forms of parental aggression in minor hockey. This study also focused specifically on minor hockey in Canada. More research needs to be done on other minor sports contexts.

Knowledge Translation

Abbreviated results of the study will be published in an open-access academic journal article, which is currently under review. Full results will be published in a book, which is currently in progress.